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SUBJECT: ACCOUNTS OF THE INTER-KOREAN RAILWAYS TRAIL RUNS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: With much fanfare on May 17, South and North Korea conducted test runs of two cross-border railways. Before the trains departed in the morning, ROK Unification Minister Lee Jae-joung said that the test runs indicated that "the heart of the Korean Peninsula is beating again." Minister Lee's DPRK counterpart, Kwon Ho-ung, chief councilor of the DPRK cabinet, said that the DPRK will make sure that the "train of unification" runs along a "track" of inter-Korean cooperation. Beyond these public comments, the train rides and lunches resulted in some spontaneous conversation and contact between officials from North and South Korea--rare since 1953. On Embassy contact commented that whether the one-time railway tests might lead to a significant improvement really depended on how much more money the ROKG was willing to invest in the DPRK. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Shortly before noon on May 17, a ROK train left Munsan Station to travel northbound through the Western Transportation Corridor, while a DPRK train left Mt. Kumgang Station to travel southbound through the Eastern Transportation Corridor; both trains returned to their points of origin later that day. Each train consisted of five carriages carrying approximately 100 South Koreans and 50 North Koreans. Although this was a one-time arrangement, those who argue that the DPRK works by precedent posit that the tests have brought the two Koreas closer to more, if limited, train traffic. On the morning of May 17, ROK Unification Minister Lee Jae-joung announced that the test runs were "reconnecting the severed bloodline of our (Korean) people . . . the heart of the Korean Peninsula is beating again." Minister Lee's DPRK counterpart, Kwon Ho-ung, chief councilor of the DPRK cabinet, told reporters that the DPRK will make sure that the "train of unification" runs along a "track" of inter-Korean cooperation.

REACTION AT JEJIN AND MUNSAN STATIONS IN ROK

¶3. (U) The South Koreans gathered at Jejin Station to await the southbound DPRK train and at Munsan Station to send off the northbound ROK train included some South Koreans who were separated from their North Korean relatives following the Korean War. One separated family member at Jejin Station told reporters that he hoped "the day will come when I will be able to travel by train to my home." The crowds at Munsan Station also included some 30 people from the Abductees'

Family Union who staged a demonstration demanding that the ROKG push for progress on verifying the fates and whereabouts of South Korean abductees and POWs detained in North Korea. The group's representative, Choi Sung-yong, explained that "the families of abductee victims are not against the test run itself, but would like to see some progress on the abductee issue."

14. (U) According to one Joongang Ilbo article, on the trip from Munsan to Kaesong, delegates from both Koreas started singing "Our Hope is Unification" when the train crossed into the northern side of the DMZ. In contrast to the excited civilian response in South Korea, the article noted that North Korean residents at Kaesong were "quiet" and "calm." One North Korean passenger commented, "Everyone is busy because it is the planting season. It's just a test run. Nothing to be excited about."

EAST COAST RUN

15. (SBU) On May 23, Dr. Kim Il-joo, Chairman of the Association of Supporters for Defecting North Korean Residents and supporter of opposition GNP presidential candidate Lee Myung-bak, described his train ride from Mt. Kumgang Station to Jejin Station during the May 17 cross-border train trials. Kim told poloffs that the 100 South Korean participants for the Donghae (East Coast) railway run traveled by bus the prior day to Sokcho, North Korea. Early on May 17, they drove from Sokcho to the DPRK station. During the trainride, ROK reporters were free to shoot video from inside the train, which was relatively surprising; some footage of which was televised after the event. In an effort to build rapport, Kim said that he served fruit to his North Korea interlocutors while they engaged in conversation. After their arrival at Jejin, the participants debarked and had lunch at the station. During lunch, he subtly passed out Parker fountain pens to North Koreans sitting near him. He even passed a one hundred U.S. dollar bill in a handshake under the table to the highest-ranking nearby North Korean. Kim lamented that he should have prepared more pens and money because this demonstration of generosity would make a positive lasting impression.

16. (SBU) At one point during the meal, ROK compatriots at Kim's table began to discuss ROK politics. While the South Koreans debated the merits and demerits of former Presidents, the DPRK interlocutors sat amazed at their ability to freely discuss and criticize former Presidents. On another subject, Kim noted that former Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh could be considered a true patriot because he unified his country, but did not build a personality cult. In other words, Ho put his people above himself. The North Koreans, however, declined to respond to this line of conversation. Nevertheless, Kim said that compared to his earlier visit to North Korea, the general atmosphere between South and North Korean participants was more relaxed. The North Koreans did not make any anti-U.S. statements nor did they display aggressive behavior. Asked if he thought the one-time railway tests might lead to a significant improvement in inter-Korean relations, Kim said that it would probably depend on how much more money the ROKG was willing to invest in the DPRK. Kim offered that the North Koreans were much more open in asking for money and seemed to understand and admit the North Korean economy was in shambles.

WEST COAST RUN

17. (U) Renowned Korean poet Ko Un, who was aboard the train to Kaesong, said that the test run was like "connecting our nation's blood vein. I hope that this means that this is the real start of realizing our dream to connect not only the Korean Peninsula, but the Asian continent." ROK National Security Adviser Baek Jong-chun stated that the event "is a

visible result of the ROKG's Korean Peninsula peace policy." Ministry of National Defense North Korea Policy Division Director Moon Sung-mook said he hoped that, "this will contribute to relieving tension and building trust, and in turn establishing peace in this land." National Assembly Foreign Affairs and Trade Committee Chairman and Uri lawmaker Kim Won-wung commented that, "we can no longer let others decide our destiny. This event is symbolic in that it demonstrates the autonomous will and capacity of the two Koreas."

¶18. (U) Dong-A Ilbo reporter Ha Tae-won, who was also on the Kaesong-bound train, wrote that Kwon Ho-ung, chief councilor of the DPRK cabinet, was visibly warmer towards "pro-engagement" figures from South Korea. In particular, Kwon praised former Hanyang University Professor Ri Young-hee, who in 1994 published a book, "A Bird Flies With Two Wings," that criticized perceived USG "hostile" policy toward the DPRK, saying he was moved by the book and urging Ri to keep writing. Kwon also toasted ROK Red Cross President Han Wan-sang, expressing the DPRK's gratitude for unconditionally repatriating Ri In-mo, and "unconverted long-term prisoner," during Han's tenure as Unification Minister in 1993. On the other hand, Kwon was cold to former Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok, apparently because Lee, in July 2006 during inter-Korean ministerial talks, declared that the ROK would suspend its rice and fertilizer assistance following the DPRK's July missile launches. Lee Jong-seok reportedly also rode on the train alone because the DPRK passenger who was to sit across from him never showed up.

¶19. (SBU) On May 19, GNP lawmaker Chin Young told poloff about his experience on the train from Munsan (ROK) to Kaesong (DPRK) during the cross-border trial, saying that he was surprised at the depth of interest in and knowledge of the South Korean presidential race. According to Chin, when asked who would win the December elections, Chin told his DPRK counterparts that Lee Myung-bak had a comfortable lead. The North Koreans then said, "How can you, a firm supporter of Park Geun-hye, say such a thing?" The North Koreans said they admired Park Geun-hye and wished her well in the elections. Chin said he suspected they admired her because she met North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in 2001 and she carried through all the promises she made to Kim during the visit.

¶10. (SBU) Chin said he was brought to the head table to meet Kwon Ho-ung, the head of the DPRK contingent, and Kwon asked that the GNP not be mentioned for fear, "people will lose their appetite if we hear the word GNP." No one at the head table would speak to Chin so he had one drink with the group and returned to his table. Shin Ho, a YTN reporter who was on the train, told poloff on May 18 that he noticed that all the buildings in Kaesong were recently painted and that North Koreans were out in numbers watching the train go by.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) The historic tests of the trains come three years after the restoration of the railways was completed in 2004. Last year the Koreans even agreed on May 25, 2006 as the date for the rail crossings, but the DPRK canceled at the last minute allegedly due to objections from its military authorities. The western train carried ROK's Unification Minister, several former Unification Ministers, and representatives from the Unification, Foreign Affairs and Trade Committee, while the eastern train had many technicians as well as lawmakers from the Construction and Transportation Committee. The apparent last-minute stoppage in the ROKG rice shipment and continued DPRK intransigence over BDA will make it more difficult for immediate progress on inter-Korean train development, but the fact that there was general public and media support for the tests could be a sign of South Korean public's higher threshold for inter-Korean development despite the lack of progress in the Six-Party Talks.

VERSHBOW